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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 001986

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION #32: BATTLE OF THE POLLS

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 1518 (NOTAL)

11. (SBU) This is no. 32 in our series on the Dominican presidential election:

BATTLE OF THE POLLS

Two polls published today, March 29, both show a much tighter presidential race, indicating that President Hipolito Mejia has picked up considerable support. Polls were done the same week in March (March 18-March 23), each with a sample universe of 1200 from across the country. Serious discrepancies between the polls are a warning that samples can be cooked as well as estimated.

A survey done by U.S. firm Hamilton Beattie & Staff for daily "Hoy" shows Leonel Fernandez (PLD) with 52 percent, with an estimated error of +/- 3 percent. Mejia (PRD) is second with 25 percent, with Estrella (PRSC) at 17 percent. Hamilton reports that in matches for a hypothetical second round Leonel Fernandez will win -- with 59 percent if confronting Mejia and 54 percent if confronting Estrella.

A poll done by "Consulting Express West, Inc.", (CEW) 180 West Broadway Avenue, New York, puts Fernandez at 47 percent with an estimated error of +/- 3.2 percent, with Eduardo Estrella second at 23.7 percent and Mejia at 15 percent. Rejection rates are 72.1 percent for Mejia, 20.6 percent for Fernandez, and 3.5 percent for Estrella. CEW results for hypothetical second round matches suggest that Mejia would lose disastrously but that Estrella could edge ahead of Fernandez 47 percent to 45 percent.

In either case Fernandez has slipped from the comfortable 63 percent in a Gallup poll in February, much as we expected. and is now within sampling error of failing to win on the first round.

Hoy's numbers

The "Hoy" poll provides some evidence that Mejia and VP candidate Subervi have had some impact with whirlwind campaign events all over the country. These have included presidential inaugurations of hundreds of public works projects, some rushed to completion for the campaign and others, already in operation, slightly refurbished to justify another ceremony. There is now a patched-up unity of the PRD -- with only ousted party president Hatuey De Camps remaining adamantly opposed to Mejia's re-election bid.

Many of the nominal PRD members, however, have yet to be convinced not to abscond to Leonel. Voters' party sympathy expressed both polls tracked their candidate preferences. Leonel's PLD 50 percent, Hipolito's PRD 28 percent, and Estrella's PRSC 16 percent. Hamilton-"Hoy" confirms that the PRSC is definitely in decline, a trend evident already before the 2002 death of aged Dominican strongman Joaquin Balaguer. The preference for the PRSC has declined from 25 percent in 2000.

Most of the poll respondents -- across gender and age groups, occupations, and regions -- view Fernandez favorably (64 percent) and Mejia unfavorably (67 percent). The only exception is farmers, where former agriculture minister (and farmer) Mejia eked out a 51 percent favorable rating. PRD vice-presidential candidate Subervi also fared badly: 61 percent of respondents didn't like him.

Voters' confidence in electoral process, also included in the "Hoy" poll, appears to have ticked up slightly. In January, a poll by another U.S. firm showed 64 percent of voters having "little or no confidence" in the Central Election Board (JCE) that is organizing the election and will adjudicate the outcome and 70 percent believing the JCE would be independent or neutral. In the latest poll, 71 percent of respondents rated the JCE as "good" or "excellent" on its

handling the electoral process -- but 58 percent still saw some likelihood of electoral fraud.

Lies, damned lies and polls

Part of the comfortable myth about the U.S. Embassy in the Dominican Republic is that we know everything that it is going on. Many are convinced that we are doing our own electoral opinion polling. We do not, in part because very often the owners of poll information are happy to share it with us before they go public with it. Still, these poll reports serve as a reminder that the apparent precision of statistics covers a world of uncertainty. How representative were those 1200-person samples? Did events intervening in the course of that week change some minds? How reputable were the polling firms? Were data massaged after delivery? A casual conspiratorial interpretation might well be that Estrella supporters aimed at taking the wind out of the sails of both the PLD and the PRD by fielding a barely plausible version of the future that would put Estrella into the palace.

The undeniable conclusion is that the campaigning is now underway in earnest. Fernandez is still the man to beat; and his job is to stay credible, to stay on message, and to protect his lead.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell, Michael Meigs.

13. (U) This report and others in this series can be read on the SIPRNET at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/index.cfm> along with extensive other current material.
HERTELL